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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses adult education at community colleges. Three types of adults returning to school are delineated: the employed male who returns to school to update his occupational skills, the housewife who comes back to school after her children have left home, and the senior citizen or retired person who is not interested in a degree. It is argued that these adult students are candidates for many kinds of individualized instruction. Several types of individualized instruction for English composition are discussed including computer-assisted instruction and radio and television instruction. It is concluded that teachers should recognize the vulnerabilities of these adult students and recognize their special human needs. (TS)

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EDUCATING ADULTS

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March 24, 1976

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On the bulletin board in the library of the community college where I work, there is an exhibit for adults returning to school. There, in the midst of catalogues, discussions of career opportunities, and information about counseling, I found an article by a middle-aged housewife who went back to school at a major university. The housewife, Diane Margolis, describes the range of reactions she had during the first year back on a campus. Although she confines herself to the problem of women, her experiences aren't truly sex-bound; I'm sure we can easily imagine the male analogue for this quotation.

> The alumna of the fifties' panty raids walks into the classroom 20 years later with the dignity of a matron, the protected sensibilities of a housewife, and a sense of justice learned while protecting her young from the minor atrocities of elementary schools. She finds herself not among that community of scholars she anticipated but in a bureaucracy geared to instruct and dispatch adolescents. Professors are her own age, or worse yet, not much older than her children. She doesn't know how to deal with them, nor they her. The usual relationship between student and professor -- painfully hierarchical -- requires a degree of student obsequiousness that the suburban housewife has long forgotten. At first she might be indignant at careless slights: professors forget appointments and lose papers; advisors vanish to other campuses. She might even fight for her "rights" as I did when I knocked at deans' doors with bitter complaints. But she soon learns that common courtesy in academia is as uncommon as middle-aged women...

Poor Ms. Margolis; but is she the typical overage student? Or is it poor Mr. Pritchard, whose doctor told him he couldn't work at his old job anymore? He's coming back to school to be re-trained for something that requires less demanding physical labor. Or poor Mr. Brooks, whose education was interrupted by his tenure in Viet Nam, or Mrs. Hadley, whose husband died six months after he retired, leaving her well-provided for, but very lonely. Which one of these is the typical overage student?

All these people are now coming back to school, and all of them are both typical and atypical. But, despite their obvious differences in background and in goals, they are all having some variation of the experience Ms. Margolis had. One of my adult students told me it took her a year to get up the nerve to walk across the campus by herself. She would always wait for another woman to walk with before venturning from the classroom buildings to the student center for coffee. Another told me he studied into the night, feeling that this time it was "do or die" for him academically. The traditional college classroom makes these students uncomfortable, because it is full of people much younger than themselves, with whom they often have little in common.

But there is one place where older students don't seem to be as uncomfortable, and that is in the community college. There is a national trend toward adults returning to school, and many whose previous educations were interrupted have come back to community college courses. The average student age in the Maricopa County Community College District, Phoenix, Arizona, where I am employed, is now twenty-six. In the future, if the trend among adults continues and if the eighteen-year-old population continues to decline -- as it certainly must -- the average age of our students will go up even further. So in a sense, there isn't and will not be anything called the "over-age" student. Ms. Margolis will be in more and better company as the seventies go on.

But we all know that adults who return to school have special problems, and that as adults re-enter education in larger and larger numbers, schools will be increasingly obligated to help them overcome the special problems associated with being beyond the traditional college age. In our District,

we have already begun to study the problems of our adult population, and to devise some solutions. Because my field is English, and because English composition is a required course through which most of these returning students must pass, I'm going to confine my illustrative remarks to one field. But it's obvious to me that the same students, the same problems, and the same methods of dealing with the problems could be found in any discipline, academic or occupational.

First, we need to look at the kinds of adults who come to community college classes. There is the veteran or the employed male who comes back to school to update his occupational skills, to train or re-train himself. Generally, he is highly motivated and wants to get a degree or certificate in the shortest possible time. Often, he already knows what he wants when he registers.

Then there is the housewife who comes back to school after her own children have left the home. Perhaps she already has a college degree and wishes only to fill her new-found free time with intellectual pursuits. Or perhaps she is dissatisfied with her status as housewife and is looking to move into a career and a new identity; she may also be simultaneously changing her marital status. Unlike the veteran or the male seeking new or better employment, the housewife is less certain of her goals.

The third major category of student we can look forward to in the future community college class is the senior citizen or retired person who is not interested in a degree, but is now enjoying some time to learn for learning's sake.

There are some common characteristics of all these groups. Here's Ms. Margolis again:

> Now, as I attempt a career without forsaking the joys of family life, without making myself in some way unlovable, I have an odd feeling that somehow I'm an imposter, that I don't belong. Perhaps that is one reason that, like so many over-age students, I cram for each examination as if my life depended on it. That's why I and others who at 18 could accept a breezy "C" with equanimity return to school as insufferable grinds.
>
> We overwork, overworry, and overbear to the annoyance of our husbands and younger fellow students. One woman I know went so far as to take her textbooks to bed with her; feeling crowded, her husband soon left....The shift in our life's direction that marks our return is not a new flexibility -- it is a last chance.
>
> Fearful of losing another minute of making another mistake we study compulsively. We treat each grade as the ultimate measure of our worth...No wonder our fellow students sometimes become irritated. And, as if our skewing class curves were not enough, some of us dominate classroom discussions with the experiences of our years -- trying to catch the professor's notice, to share something with the only age-mate around. College is a lonely place for those who have no peers.

Certainly some of our students feel the tensions she describes so vividly. But others do not. I have had women tell me that they were perfectly comfortable coming back to school, because they were under no pressure. Coming out of sheer curiosity and interest, they dominate class discussions because they are self-possessed, confident of their experience, anxious to share their insights....Immune from the social pressures of collegiate life, they find the classroom a welcome diversion from the soap opera, the PTA, the retirement community.

The diversity of over-age students, compounded by the diversity of the college-age population, poses an instructional problem for a professor -- especially in a course like freshman composition, where all these community representatives come together in a frantic effort to pass a required course. Faced with a class composed partly of Ms. Margolis and

her anxiety-stricken compadres, partly of veterans and senior citizens, partly of young minority students, and partly of familiar collegiate-looking specimens, what can a teacher do? (Besides resolve to keep his appointments and hold on to those papers!) My contention is that the unique situation in the community college -- so many returning adults and such a broad spectrum of abilities -- makes unique teaching methods necessary. Individualized instruction is not only possible in the community college, in some instances it is mandatory. There is no such thing as the "typical" over-aged student, or even the "typical" student-age student.

Returning adults, highly motivated and usually in a hurry to achieve their educational objectives, are excellent candidates for all kinds of individualized instruction. We may offer them credit by examination, credit for life or work experience, military equivalency credit, credit by evaluation, and a variety of non-traditional delivery systems like cassettes, correspondence courses, and radio-television courses. More than any other group in the community college, these adults do not need a traditional classroom in which to learn....Adequate counseling about the availability of alternate systems for receiving credit could save them months of frustration and wasted time.

For example, at one college in our District we have a pilot program called TICCIT, (Time-shared Interactive Computer Controlled Information Television) a computer-assisted education program that allows students in remedial English, freshman composition, and mathematics an open-entry, open-exit way to learn without a conventional classroom. The student seats himself before a keyboard and a television screen, receives his instructions

from the computer, and can finish the course as quickly or as slowly as his/her needs dictate. Proctors stationed around the room provide individual help, and certificated instructors are in charge of the paper-grading. But by and large, the adult, highly-motivated student can learn by himself on these machines and finish freshman composition quickly, without having to wait fifteen weeks.

For students in outlying areas, senior citizens, and home-bound adults, we have experimented with offering English 101 over the radio. This fall, we are considering offering it on television as well. There is a good composition course prepared by Dallas County Community College District that may be rented. Students view the lectures at home, coming to the campus only to complete written assignments and receive help from the instructor. Our experience shows that, while normal college-age students often don't do well through televised instruction, highly motivated adults are grateful for its conveniences. And there are many other areas in the college curriculum that lend themselves even more easily to radio and television instruction.

But some returning students prefer the classroom. Having grown up in classrooms, they distrust the unfamiliar non-traditional methods. They would feel cheated if they didn't sit and listen for fifty minutes to a lecturer, or participate in a classroom exchange of ideas. How shall we, as teachers, rearrange our attitudes to accomodate students our own age or older?

First, we must give up our conventional attitudes about authority. Ms. Margolis is right; we are a bureaucracy geared to instruct and dispatch adolescents. Our behavior, our rules and regulations, our due

dates and strictures about late papers, our roll-taking and examination policies betray us. Adult students do not generally need policing, although they seem often to be the most responsive to it. We take roll; they stagger to class with fevers. We announce due dates; they hand in papers they have stayed up several nights in a row to write. We give exams; they study for days in advance. We give grades; they accept them as a measure of self-worth. They lack the healthy cynicism that protects adolescent students from anxiety, and thus they are the recipients of the professor's need for power, authority, and control of the class. It seems so simple and obvious: we've got to learn to treat all our students as adults -- especially the ones whose life experiences truly qualify them for the title.

A corollary point is that we must recognize their vulnerabilities. We must remember that reciting in class isn't easy, especially if you are out of the habit of doing it. And we must also remember that excessive reciting bespeaks a similar insecurity; a need to establish contact with the professor or the rest of the class. The over-age student must be encouraged to make his contribution, though not at the expense of the rest of the class.

After we have taken the general steps of liberalizing our classroom procedures for adults and recognizing their special human needs, there is one more specific action we can take: we can recognize their presence in our classes intellectually. And that may mean changing our textbooks, some of our methods and our course content. All too many texts are geared to the adolescent: readers contain essays on the identity crisis, on growning up, on the youth cult. We need some new texts with broader appeal.

And many of us have geared our classroom performances to younger students. We try to reach them through contemporary slang, and through our modes of dress and the tone of our jokes. Perhaps we ought to take a good look at who's out there in the audience before we enter the classroom jean-clad and bearded, hearty and hip, to open the semester with an anecdote about sex and grass. And finally, we need to reconsider the writing assignments we give: some adults don't "get off on" topics like "What would you like best in a roommate or spouse?"

In summary, I'd have to say that we in the community college have had to come to terms with an incredible heterogeneity in our student body lately. According to Ms. Margolis' article, the university has continued to ignore that heterogeneity, but the community college, if it is to live up to its charge, can't afford to ignore it. We have no overage students, no underage students -- we have everyone. For us, what's really basic about educating overage students is that there are none. Everyone can learn. Lately, everyone wants to learn. Our job is to help them, rather than to provide obstacles...Our non-traditional students may require some new methods, but those methods are already available. I'd like to find Ms. Margolis, to tell her she has plenty of peers in college, and she doesn't have to be lonely. Community colleges have both middle-aged women and common courtesy in large supply.